

The Work of Peace and the Leaven of Presumption

James 4:13-17

5/17/2020

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Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. [ESV]

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and how it communicates to us in such profound and challenging ways. We pray, Lord, that you would be so kind and so gracious to speak to us once again today through your word, press it and seal it to our hearts. In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

Again, the title of the message is the Work of Peace and the Leaven of Presumption. In a previous meditation, James was concerned about addressing worldliness, worldliness that had them trying to assume God's role as the ultimate authority and judge. The antidote to that arrogance involved knowing your place and submitting to God. Now, as we enter into this new section in James, James is concerned about addressing worldliness, worldliness that has them assuming a station in life that elevated them to a status of absolute self-sufficiency. The antidote to that arrogance involves knowing your place and submitting to God. This is not a recording.

But let me just get ahead of a question that often comes up when it comes to this passage of scripture. And it involves planning and the way that James has sort of an aversion, or at least appears to have an aversion, to planning. And James in no way, shape, or form is looking to dissuade Christians from making plans and progressing in their vocation. Such an approach to life, failing to make plans and making no attempt to progress in our vocation, would be poor stewardship at best. And it would sound pretty strange for James to teach that if we were to bring that teaching alongside the illustration that we find in Luke 14:25-33 which presume the importance of planning when it comes to building a tower and going into war.

Now, what James is concerned about is Christians living as if God has no place in their life, or Christians so wrapped up in their lives that they plan and live as if God does not exist. He is concerned about us attempting to sit in the seat of the sovereign as if we have complete control over our lives. And James's desire is to encourage us to acknowledge God in all our ways, rest in His providential care, and walk humbly before Him.

The sort of thing that James is concerned about is what English puritan Stephen Charnock referred to as practical atheism, which brings us into our first point of the day, the foolishness of presumption. James opens up with a bit of an abrupt charge as we enter into verse 13. He starts off with, "Come now." Some translations render it as, "Now listen," which sounds a little softer and kinder. But as I read James in this passage, James is presenting himself as someone who has been cooped up in, maybe, social isolation. And he is exercising a measure of frustration and exasperation with the people that he's talking to. So James is coming to us with a, "Come now." And James is coming to us with a "Come now" that has him seeming like he feels some kind of way. And you'll get what I mean when I say that.

James is speaking of Christian merchants who aren't necessarily outright rebels. They don't have a full-orbed atheistic worldview. But their hearts appear to present them as atheists for they say things like, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." What they're saying is they decide when they go, they decide where they go, they decide

how long they stay, and they determine the outcome, and they don't need divine intervention. By doing so or by communicating in this manner or having this sort of mindset, what they were claiming was self-sufficiency and autonomy. And James is taking an issue with that.

James is concerned about Christians exhibiting proud complacency that crops God out of the picture. As I think about that, I imagine a couple, a guy and a girl. And their relationship has gone awry, and so they have broken up. And in their phone, they have a litany of pictures of their ex. And they want to delete certain pictures, but as they look at those pictures, they like that hairstyle that they had that day. They like that outfit. So what do they do? They crop the other individual out of the picture. Well, that's what they were doing. They were cropping God out of the picture because they felt like they didn't need to have Him there. They have their resources, and their resources allow them to have a measure of autonomy, which they celebrated.

But not only do we find them exercising the action of cropping God out of the picture, they are instead or in addition to that, they're exercising what Tim Keller referred to as cosmic plagiarism. They are attempting to take credit for something that was not their own. They did not possess absolute autonomy. They do not possess absolute self-sufficiency. Those are incommunicable attributes, attributes that only God has. And He does not share them with us. Instead, James would have them to acknowledge God in all their ways. James would have them to remember that their life is uncertain. That's what he's getting at when he says, "Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring." Your life is uncertain. Only God knows the end from the beginning. Only God possesses infinitude. Only God providentially guides all things in creation to their expected end, and He's not doing this in a co-op sort of fashion.

God is, in many ways as I think about our current climate, putting us all in timeout. He's giving us an opportunity in this pandemic to see that we are not autonomous, that we do not possess the exalted position of being gods. Douglas Moo says it this way, and I quote, "Illness, accidental death, or the return of Christ could cut short our lives just as quickly as the morning sun dissipates, the mist, or shift in wind direction blows away smoke." Not only are our lives uncertain and our tomorrows are uncertain, but our lives are a mere mist and a vapor. And James is looking to expose our foolishness, our mindset where we think we have absolute control. And he's showing us that no, we don't, not at all. And instead, in the language of Proverbs 27:1, he's calling us to "not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring."

And in response to their foolishness, this foolish presumption, this foolishness that says there is no God that intervenes, James gives them an answer to their presumption. And, again, James stays true to this - I don't know - abrupt attitude of social isolation. We read it sort of in a genteel poetic way. We read it like this. We say, instead you ought to say. But I think James is saying something along the lines of what you need to say in response to what you're saying is if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. James is taking them back to verse 13 to what they were saying. And James is bringing them from verse 13 to verse 15 and says, look, let me flip the script. In fact, let me take your script and provide you with a new script and say, what you're saying is incorrect. These are your lines if the Lord wills.

And as he is bringing us into this new script, this new way of seeing things, he is not giving us this religious Christian formula. He's not saying tagged onto every comment, every plan that you verbalize, every word that you say, he's not saying to tag on the end of that, "If the Lord wills" as if you're jinxing yourself if you don't say it. No. James wants us to have a settled principle in mind that our times, plans, and lives are in God's hands, and we do nothing without His permission. And we hold our plans, which we're allowed to have, with an open hand allowing God to surprise us, allowing God to occasionally flip the script so to speak and say, I know that you plan to do that, but I have other plans. I have other thoughts for you, nonetheless, thoughts of good, thoughts of peace to give you an expected end.

That brings us to verses 16 and 17, the nature of presumption. As James has been challenging them and their foolish presumption, foolish not in the sense of calling them stupid but foolish in a sense

of what we find in Psalm 14 where the fool says in his heart, "There is no God," and James is giving them a corresponding answer to their foolishness that, yes, there is a God. And this God possesses sovereign rule over my life. James now comes to the nature of their presumption. It's not merely a minor faux pas. It's not merely something that we can brush it or the Lord can brush under the carpet.

Now, at this point, you could be thinking, well, I get the gist of what James is trying to say. I get the gist of what James is teaching me here. He can stop. But he needs to press his point home because he does not want us to simplify the issue as if James, or rather that the Lord is concerned or against us even having plans. He's after an attitude. He's after an attitude of arrogance and boasting. And so happy were they in their arrogance and their boasting that they even boasted in their boasting. That's what's being said there as it says, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance." You are boasting in your boasting. You're proud, and you're proud of it. You look to your resources, and you're so happy that you have these resources that allow you to do all that you think that you can do. And the Lord is saying, I am after your inner attitude that's given to claiming control and status, this looking to elevate yourself above and beyond where you belong.

Peter H. David describes these merchants in the following way when he speaks of their arrogance and their boasting. He says, and I quote, "And on it goes, name dropping, allusions to places and persons of power, gloating over deals to be made, but all of it empty boasting for only God controls our lives." God controls our lives. Maybe they were pulling up to the CPC parking lot in their new sports car parking across multiple parking spaces so as not to get a scratch and making sure that they made a big show of what they had. And the Lord is after them for this type of boasting, this type of ostentation, this showiness.

He's saying it's not merely an inconvenience, but James says this type of boasting, all such boasting like this, he says it's evil. And the Greek word he uses there, "ponyros," is not necessarily speaking to the character of this evil. But it's instead speaking to the effect of it. He says this boasting is a malignancy. How about this? It's like an infectious disease. It attaches itself to Christian communities, and it spreads. He says as you are concerned about this work of peace in your Christian community, your boasting, your arrogance, your attitude of self-sufficiency is a threat to it. You need to be aware.

James comes down to the very end. And he ends with something of a proverb here. "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." It seems clear that he's warning us of the sin of omission. But some have come to this and they see more there. They look and they say, well, okay, the word here rendered "the right thing" in other places in scripture tell us it's rendered as "the good." So whoever knows the good to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. And "the good" refers to charitable things, charitable acts. And so they say that in that, what James is actually saying is the problem with their boasting, the problem with their merchandising was the fact that it was all about them, and they had no attitude or heart for the poor.

I suppose you could draw that out of that passage. But I think as James is bringing us to this end here in verse 17, we see a couple of different parallels. It's almost written as if it's a Hebrew proverb. At one point in verse 13 he's saying, "Those who say," and then in verse 15, "What you ought to say," and in verse 14 he speaks about what they don't know, and then verse 17 he parallels that with what they do know. And what do they know at this point? They know that their boasting is sin. They know that they are not God. They know that they don't possess infinitude or control or limitlessness. They know that they don't control all things in creation. They know that they are not the masters of their fate nor the captains of their soul.

And James is saying, look, you know better than to act like this. And knowing that God is the one who's in control, and you act or fail to act in a way that acknowledges Him in what you're doing, that's sin. This sin of omission is knowing that our lives are uncertain and fleeting, the sin of omission is God is the only self-sufficient one, this sin of omission is knowing that God knows the future and governs creation, the sin of omission is knowing that we do nothing without God's permission and that we ought to be

holding our plans with an open hand and leaving them for God, it is knowing all of this, and yet acting as if we don't need God at all. And James wants to bring home the reality that this sort of attitude, this sort of inner attitude is not an inconvenience. It's an infection. And it will and it does disrupt the peace in the community.

Let me leave you with this last verse, Proverbs 3:5-8. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh, refreshment to your bones," peace in your community.

Heavenly Father, we thank you Lord for the way that your word comes to us. It comes at us and it challenges us. I pray, Lord, that you would help us to have a far more all-encompassing God-entrancing view of all creation. Lord, I pray that you would take the truth of your word as captured here in your holy book and press it home and seal it to our hearts. This we all ask in Jesus's name. Amen.

God bless you, and I miss you.